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December 18, 2008

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On disaster planning, Indiana ranks near top

Jeff Wiehe

The Journal Gazette

National scorecard

Indiana scored 9 out of 10 in a recent report showing the state's preparedness when it comes to diseases, disasters and bioterrorism attacks. Here's what other states scored:

10 out of 10: Louisiana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Virginia, Wisconsin

9 out of 10: Alabama, Indiana, Michigan, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont

8 out of 10: Arkansas, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Washington

7 out of 10: California, Colorado, D.C., Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Utah, West Virginia, Wyoming

6 out of 10: Alaska, Idaho, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, Texas

5 out of 10: Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Maryland, Nebraska, Montana

If the plague were to strike Indiana, officials are ready for it.

So too are they ready for an earthquake, a flood, a terrorist attack or any other sign of the Apocalypse.

At least, that is true according to an annual report ranking the preparedness level of each state's health department when it comes to diseases, disasters and bioterrorism. The report was released last week by a non-profit organization and a health care foundation.

Indiana scored 9 out of 10 in the report titled "Ready or Not?" that was put together by the non-partisan Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The average score among all states, graded by 10 criteria chosen by researchers, was 7 out of 10.

Criteria included whether a state's public health lab could meet the expectations of that state's public flu plan; whether the state identified pathogens responsible for food-borne disease outbreaks quickly; whether it bought 50 percent or more of its share of federally subsidized antiviral medications to prepare for a potential pandemic flu outbreak; and whether a state's level of funding for public health services stayed the same in the past year.

"We're particularly pleased with that score," said Loren Robertson, assistant commissioner of Public Health and Preparedness for the Indiana Department of Health.

Only five states scored a perfect 10 in the report. Indiana was one of seven, including northern neighbor Michigan, to score a 9. Indiana, like 25 other states, lost a point for not having an intrastate courier system operating 24 hours for specimen pickup and delivery.

Serena Vinter, senior research associate for Trust for America's Health and the lead author of the study, said having such a courier system is important for timeliness. She said, though, that it might be something easy to cut in a year when 37 states are currently facing shortfalls in 2009 budgets.

"You perhaps don't notice the impact of it until there is an unfortunate event," said Vinter of not having such a courier system.

As of Dec. 10, Indiana was not on the growing list of states facing budget shortfalls, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. In lieu of a contracted courier system to transport vaccines or specimens, the state uses its 94 local health departments, field workers and even the state police, according to Robertson.

The few times such transports have been necessary, they've been completed within 24 hours, Robertson said.

"That has been no problem at all," Robertson said. "We have a system that works."

Dr. Deborah McMahan, Allen County health commissioner, said specimens dealing with rabies are the most common ones that need to be transported to the Indianapolis lab. She said someone from the local department would drive such a sample to Indianapolis, while samples that don't require such urgent attention are usually shipped by mail.

"If we have a potential case of anthrax or something like that, I think the state has a protocol that would involve the state police," McMahan said.

The report also found that federal funding for state and local preparedness has been cut 25 percent since 2005. Such cuts, coupled with cuts that states are making to budgets in response to the financial crisis, have jeopardized steady progress toward improved preparedness as documented in previous reports, officials for Trust for America's Health suggest.

"The cuts to state budgets in the next few years could lead to a disaster for the nation's disaster preparedness," said Jeff Levi, executive director of Trust for America's Health, in a statement.

Indiana's funding has stayed even so far, Robertson said, though how long that will last is anyone's guess.

"We don't know what the new budget will be or what the new Congress will do," he said. "You'll need a crystal ball for that one."

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Beware: 'Tis the season for home candle fires

December is the most common time for home candle fires.

Candle fires peak on Christmas Day, followed by New Year's Day and Christmas Eve.

"Candle fires are more common around the holidays due to more candles burned and decorations are often close by," said Jim Greeson, Indiana State Fire Marshal and Indiana Department of Homeland Security (IDHS) Division of Fire and Building Safety Director. "We urge extra caution during this time of the year. The holidays are a memorable time because of interaction with family and friends and shouldn't be ruined by a holiday fire."

IDHS Fire & Building Safety estimates that in 2007, approximately 122 home structure fires were started by candles.

These fires resulted in an estimated direct property loss of over \$2 million.

The IDHS Fire and Building Safety Division recommend following these important candle safety tips:

- Never leave a burning candle unattended.
- Extinguish candles before leaving a room, leaving your home or going to sleep. Falling asleep was a factor in 12 percent of home candle fires and 26 percent of associated deaths, according to the National Fire Protection Association.
- Keep candles at least 12 inches away from anything that can burn, including decorations, paper, wreaths and bows.
- Keep all candles, matches and lighters out of reach of children and pets.
- Make sure lit candles are not in places where they can be accidentally knocked over.
- Use sturdy, non-flammable candle holders that will collect dripping wax.
- Trim wicks to 1/4 inch. Long or crooked wicks can cause uneven burning and dripping.
- Don't use candles in bedrooms and sleeping areas.
- Don't use candles as a decoration on a Christmas tree.
- Use a flashlight, not a candle, for emergency lighting.
- Consider using battery-operated flameless candles.
- Extinguish candles when they burn down to within two inches of their holder or decorations.
- To avoid hot wax spatter, blow out a candle by holding your finger in front of the flame and blow at it. The air will flow around your finger and extinguish the candle from both sides, preventing spatter.

"It is also important for every residence to have a working smoke detector," added Greeson. "It doesn't take much effort, which makes it unfortunate that so many Hoosier lives have been lost due to the lack of a working smoke detector on each level of the home."

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Stove used for warmth sets fire

2 families are left homeless in blaze at Eden Green site

Holly Abrams

The Journal Gazette

Safety tips

Space heaters

- Maintain 3 feet of separation between the heater and other household objects, including linens.
- Plug heaters into a wall outlet, not an extension cord.
- Use the recommended fuel for the heater.
- Turn off heaters when a room is unoccupied.
- Choose a unit with an emergency shut-off feature.

Fireplaces and wood stoves

- Use only dry, seasoned wood.
- Make sure fireplaces have a sturdy screen to prevent flying sparks.
- Allow ashes to cool before disposing of them in a metal container.
- Have chimneys professionally inspected annually.

Other tips

- Install a smoke alarm on at least every level and test the batteries every month.
- Don't overload electrical outlets or power strips.
- Keep fire hydrants near homes and businesses free of snow.

Source: Fort Wayne Fire Department and the Indiana Department of Homeland Security

An afternoon apartment fire provided an unfortunate reminder Monday of the dangers of using alternative heating methods.

The blaze at a 16-unit building at Eden Green Apartments, at 1323 Greene St., started just before 2 p.m. Monday, Fort Wayne firefighters said.

The cause of the fire was ruled accidental because of the use of a stove for heating purposes, a report said.

Although no one was injured in the fire, two families were displaced and were being assisted by American Red Cross workers, according to apartment management. The rest of the tenants were allowed back into their apartments.

The two-story building sustained moderate water damage and heavy fire damage.

Firefighters said there was visible smoke coming from the second floor when they arrived. All tenants left the building safely before firefighters arrived.

"This year it's a tough time economically for a lot of people and they are looking at ways to save money ... especially that we've had a very cold December," said Susan Banta, fire department spokeswoman. "They really, really have to put safety first."

If possible, homeowners should consider using space heaters for warmth.

But even those devices come with safety precautions.

Without a space heater, homeowners should bundle up with extra layers for warmth, rather than other more dangerous options.

“Stoves and ovens are not designed to put out enough heat to heat an apartment, or a room or a house,” Banta said.

The Greene Street tenants were fortunate no one was injured.

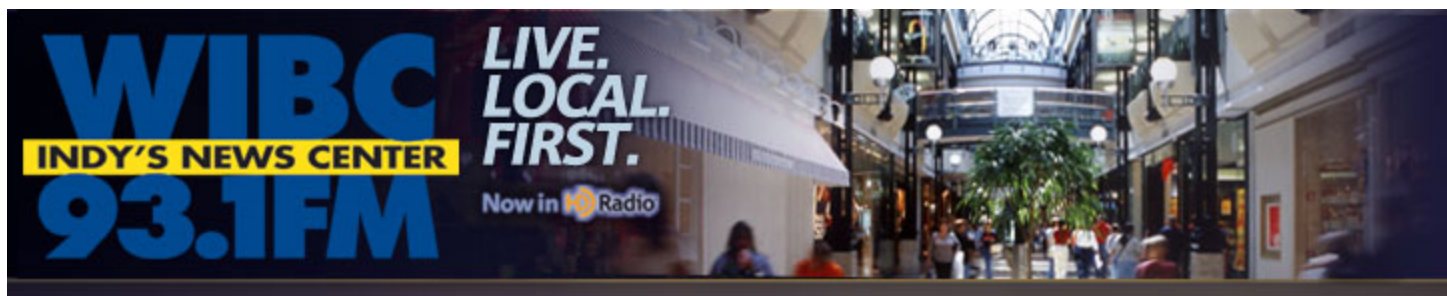
“There are 16 apartments in that building – the opportunity for that to have escalated is already there,” Banta said.

Statewide in 2007, heating equipment was involved in 520 home fires, according to the Indiana State Fire Marshal’s office.

The majority of those fires occurred in December, January and February.

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Think Safety on the Roads This Winter

By Don Riley
12/15/2008

Winter officially begins on Sunday, but some of us have already gotten a crash course in driving on the ice and snow.

Unlike other seasons, winter driving requires more mental preparation and physically preparing your vehicle for the task.

John Erickson with the Indiana Department of Homeland Security suggests leaving earlier, but slow down and use the extra time to drive more cautiously.

Drivers of vehicles equipped with anti-lock brakes or four-wheel drive should resist the temptation to be overconfident.

Carry a good ice scraper and snow brush in your car and take the time to use them so you can see clearly all around your vehicle.

Whenever you turn on your wipers, also remember to turn on your headlights. The wipers help you to see road hazards ahead and the headlights help other drivers to see you.

Also, avoid distractions like your cell phone when you're driving in winter weather. Let calls go to voicemail and deal with them after you've gotten off the road.

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Winter-Weather Safety Tips

Monday, December 15, 2008 1:52 PM

(Source: The Tribune (Seymour, Ind.)) By The Tribune, Seymour, Ind.

Dec. 15--Hazardous driving conditions because of snow and ice on highways and bridges lead to many traffic accidents, which is a leading cause of death during winter storms. Another primary cause of death is exposure, according to the Indiana Department of Homeland Security, which has issued the following information in preparation for expected severe weather.

People, pets, and livestock are susceptible to frostbite and hypothermia during winter storms.

Those at risk are primarily either engaged in outdoor activity (shoveling snow, digging out vehicles or assisting stranded motorists), or are the elderly or very young.

Use of generators, kerosene heaters and alternative forms of heating may create other hazards such as fires and carbon monoxide poisoning.

Winter emergency kit

Supplies should include:

At least two blankets or a sleeping bag

Flashlight or battery-powered lantern and extra batteries

Booster (jumper) cables

Emergency flares

Extra clothing, particularly boots, hats and mittens

A steel shovel and rope to use as a lifeline

Bottled water or juice and nonperishable high-energy foods (granola bars, raisins, nuts, peanut butter or cheese crackers)

First-aid kit and necessary medications

Sand or non-clumping cat litter for tire traction, if your vehicle gets stuck in snow or ice

A cell phone and charger which can be adapted to vehicle use.

Ice scraper and snow brush

Tire repair kit and pump

Winter driving tips:

If you can avoid driving or take public transportation, do so.

Pay attention to weather reports. Allow time in your schedule for bad weather and/or traffic delays.

Keep spare window washer fluid in the trunk and make sure the wiper blades are in good working condition

Become familiar with your vehicle's winter weather operating characteristics. Front-wheel-drive vehicles generally handle better than rear-wheel vehicles on slippery roads because the weight of the engine is on the drive wheels, improving traction.

Keep your windows clear of snow and ice. Remember to clean head, tail and brake lights.

If you need to turn on your wipers, you need to turn on your headlights.

Bridges become slick and icy before roads. Bridge temperatures can be five to six degrees colder than roadways, so drive with extreme caution during freezing temperatures.

Keep your gas tank at least half full. Fill the tank before you park for lengthy periods. This will help prevent fuel line freeze-up.

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